



MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2003

R 148TH YEAR

## Santa Barbara dentist to do his drilling in Afghanistan

By **MICHAEL TODD**  
NEWS-PRESS DEPUTY METRO EDITOR

Santa Barbara's "MacGyver dentist" arrives in Afghanistan's wild and woolly Wardak province Tuesday with plans to make use of his expertise and a self-designed portable dental office to benefit a group of orphans.

Longtime tooth doctor Jim Rolfe leaves from Los Angeles today and expects to arrive in Kabul 36 hours later, with about 500 pounds of equipment. Traveling with him will be local television graphic artist (and News-Press Afghan diarist) Kathleen Rafiq and photographer Pete Bawden.

"I feel a lot of kinship with the Afghan orphans," Dr. Rolfe said. "They were deprived of their future by two superpowers who went into their country and fought it out for 20 years." In his own little way, he continued, he wants to show the people a more benign face of America.

This will be Dr. Rolfe's first foray into the

### MORE INSIDE

■ Proposed Afghan constitution, which declares it a Muslim state, will be made public this week. **B1**

In his Canon Perdido office, Dr. Jim Rolfe unfurls the portable plywood dental chair that he's taking to Afghanistan. The holes will make it lighter for transport and set up.



STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

## Dentist paying a visit to Afghanistan

### ■ ROLFE

*Continued from Page A1*

world of direct humanitarian outreach to Afghanistan, but he won't go as a stranger. He once performed a root canal on the governor of Wardak province, Sarajudin Wardak, when he was in Santa Barbara. The two were introduced through their mutual friend, Ms. Rafiq. Mr. Wardak is providing Dr. Rolfe with a translator, an armed bodyguard and two clinical helpers for the length of his two-week stay in Afghanistan.

"He informed me that aid sent to help rebuild Afghanistan does not reach the provinces," the dentist reported, "and my knowledge of this inspires me even more to go there with my professional skills."

Dr. Rolfe describes this jaunt to the Jamaladin orphanage in the central part of the province east of Kabul as a "test run," since he plans to return for future good work.

"I have a yearlong visa, with multi-use entry," he noted. He also has some turbans and local-style clothing sewn by his sister and his girlfriend.

Dr. Rolfe says he's spent \$17,000 of his own money so far on equipment and airfares to the country, not counting the time that his local

practice will be closed while he's gone.

Some of that money has gone into contraptions of his own devising, such as a portable plywood dental chair — holes drilled throughout to make it lighter — that he designed and constructed on his own. And while Dr. Rolfe bought a \$3,000 portable X-ray camera, his darkroom solution makes use of a taped Hefty bag, a roll of red film and an old camera tripod.

"I call him the MacGyver dentist," Ms. Rafiq said.

And it will take someone as ingenious as the TV action hero to make do in Wardak province, where no dentist is available for the 40,000 residents and the only doctor, Dr. Rolfe said, is the OB/GYN also based at the orphanage.

In Afghanistan, the dentist says he plans to offer services as complete as he does in his Canon Perdido office.

"Basically, extractions — that's not that complex. I'm actually set up to do restorative dentistry. I'll be able to give them the same services over there due to the equipment I'm taking."

He expects that his stay will be worthwhile for the 40-odd boys in the orphanage.

"Because the orphanage is small I feel I can be really effective and I can get some facility in Pashtun (the language used in central and southern

Afghanistan)."

He also hopes to teach some basic dental techniques.

"No one there has any knowledge of dentistry," he said. "There's no technological base to work from."

Appropriately, Dr. Rolfe already has a much larger base than many of his peers. He built the insides of his own office in Santa Barbara — which features egg-shaped rooms and a tinkling waterfall amid the more traditional spit sinks and drilling tables, he does his own lab work, he has his own machine shop and one of his hobbies is to recycle and repair things.

Dr. Rolfe plans to leave some of the equipment behind in Wardak for the continued use of the province's residents, and he's continuing to scout around for old, simple equipment that he can ship over. He's also taking some less high-tech supplies, like 120 pairs of socks for the boys.

A native of Boise, Idaho, Dr. Rolfe first came to Santa Barbara County in 1974 as a member of the Sunburst Commune. As the tooth doctor there, he got his first brush with frontier dentistry. When he left the commune in 1982, he set up shop in Santa Barbara and has operated a private practice since.

e-mail: [mtodd@newspress.com](mailto:mtodd@newspress.com)